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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002831

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TAGS: PGOV PREL TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: CENTER-RIGHT DEMOCRAT PARTY DOWN FOR THE COUNT WHILE CHAIRMAN CLINGS TO SEAT

REF: ANKARA 1381

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, for Reasons 1.4 (b ,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. After an abysmal showing in Turkey's July 22 election, Democrat Party's (DP) reflections on how it got to this point and how to recover have been supplanted by fractious internal jockeying. Center-right consensus holds that DP was doomed as soon as the planned merger with the Motherland Party (Anavatan) fell through, but a series of mistakes and leadership stumbles also contributed. Now, with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) firmly controlling the conservative center, DP may thwart its own revival by failing to unify to dislodge a chairman intent on staying in office. END SUMMARY.

10 Ways to Kill a Party

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¶2. (C) A number of factors conspired to spell disaster for DP, all linked to the heedless style of party chairman Mehmet Agar. The most serious failure came last spring, when the promised merger of DP (the renamed True Path Party, or DYP) and center-right rival Anavatan fell through, largely due to mismanagement at the top (reftel). One DP official blamed party leaders for failing to realize that the merger couldn't be imposed by a handshake, but that working level bridges would be required; party slots should be filled by those with the best credentials, not merely divvied up at the top.

¶3. (C) DP Administrative Board member Selma Acuner strongly suggested to us that -- rather than trying to ensure the merger's success -- someone pocketed a hefty profit to guarantee its failure. Her chief suspects were Anavatan leader Erkan Mumcu and DP Chairman Mehmet Agar's corrupt cronies. In any case, the failed merger created a crisis of confidence that sent votes elsewhere. Contacts on both the left and right agree that had the merger succeeded, it would easily have generated enough momentum to win 15 percent of the vote; instead, DP took just 5.4 percent, and Anavatan withdrew from the election altogether.

¶4. (C) Another grievous error was Chairman Agar's fateful decision to prevent his 4 DYP deputies from voting in the April 27 presidential vote, according to contacts. Their absence helped ensure that fewer than 367 deputies were

present -- the number the Constitutional Court later ruled was the quorum required to open a presidential vote -- which led to parliament's dissolution and early general elections. Agar's former advisor on religious affairs, Muhammed Cakmak, called this an "historic mistake," and DP contacts at all levels point to this as a central reason for DP's crash.

¶15. (C) Questionable choices for parliamentary candidates -- in a list with gaping holes reserved for Anavatan -- spotlight the role played by corruption and mismanagement. Selma Acuner claims she won't resign from DP's Administrative Board until she sees an accounting of candidate slots sold by Agar's "handlers" Mumtaz Yavuz (a former MP and nightclub owner) and Celal Adan (former DYP Istanbul chairman). Acuner described as pointless board meetings for candidate selection, because Yavuz and Adan simply advised Agar to assign seats to people not even being discussed by the board. Another DP official said Agar was completely inaccessible to party members during the list-making process.

¶16. (C) Former Ankara provincial DP deputy chairman Cuneyt Dincman asserts that DP's campaign paled in comparision to AKP's very professional campaign. For instance, a two-page pamphlet on health care languished for two years; only in the final week of the campaign did the party print and distribute it. Several contacts confirm that DP, which adopted a new name and logo at the opening of the election campaign and had no financial oversight, now has no money left.

¶17. (C) Chairman Agar campaigned throughout Turkey for over a year before the election and was one of the few political leaders to bring fresh (if sometimes half-baked) ideas to old debates. Inconsistency put off some -- first Agar called on

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terrorists to "come down from the mountains and conduct politics on the plains," and then he asserted he would be tougher on terrorism than anyone. In the critical months before the election, party insiders say Agar allowed himself to be managed and misled by Celal Adan. Acuner describes Agar as unreliable, unpredictable, lazy, and unable to put his own stamp on other people's analysis. Kazim Yilmaz observes that Agar had too much self-confidence and failed to create a solid team.

New Rules, Just Right

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¶18. (C) Party officials admit DP has been behind the curve at a time when Turkey is undergoing rapid and exciting transformation. Cakmak sees a country that has outgrown its traditional underpinnings of social and religious structure; in the past, religious communities, the feudal system, and paternal instruction guided voters. A better-educated, more economically mobile young population has loosened the bonds of those first two influences and turned the tables on the third. Successful young people, he claims, are now more likely to influence their parents' voting than the other way around. Although decades of rapid urbanization had eroded some traditional values, young people now are embracing those values, adapting conservative traditions to modern life. Turkey is becoming more Muslim in a way that incorporates urban, intellectual, contemporary worldviews; its adherents go to the cinema and follow fashion trends. Rural kids are better educated, more confident, and are carving a new place in society. These developments are undermining urban elitist bureaucratic structures and ethnic nationalism alike. AKP, he notes, has understood these changes very well -- indeed, this is what AKP is made of. DP was not able to parlay its secular, center-right approach -- potentially appealing to many Turks wary of AKP's more Islamist leanings -- into votes.

Where Do We Go From Here?

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¶19. (C) The trick for DP, its frustrated officials agree, is

to tap into that changing social context more effectively. Mehmet Agar's former economic advisor Kazim Yilmaz says the party needs a new vision and "trademark," as well as greater clarity on who its target voters are. New leadership is a must. But Mehmet Agar, who so nobly "resigned" on election night, later reneged, in part to retain prestige as chairman as he faces 22 legal cases, including two involving the Susurluk scandal and mystery killings of the 1990s. Agar recently canceled DP's extraordinary convention, scheduled for November 17 to elect a new chairman, at the request of the party's General Administrative Council. A number of DP delegates told us they would do everything in their power to see Agar booted, but their failure to coalesce around a clear front-runner contributed to the postponement. As many as 17 separate factions are squirming under Agar's entrenched rule.

¶10. (C) Self-described "internal opposition leader" Mehmet Ali Bayar is favored by some contacts as a likely replacement for Agar, and he seems to agree. Bayar claims Anavatan leader Mumcu has pledged that if Bayar is elected DP chairman, Anavatan will complete the merger initiated last spring. Bayar is looking to the provinces to gauge both his own and the party's prospects; he believes the party infrastructure remains sound (if Agar doesn't rig the provincial congresses) and that a revitalized leadership would prime the pump for traditional donors to start giving again. If, as Bayar suspects, the secularist stronghold of Izmir "falls" to the AKP in the March 2009 local elections, the resulting implosion on the center-left will create room for a center-center-right party to blossom. He cautions that Agar may not have played his last card to delay his ouster; there is precedent for a six- month postponement granted under the flimsiest of pretexts, potentially leaving Agar at the helm until November 2008.

¶11. (C) COMMENT. DP officials can articulate their party's shortcomings, and many seem sensitive to broader social changes that have fundamentally altered Turkish politics. However, the post-election period of reflection has

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degenerated into a leadership scramble that will keep the party on the margins and allow AKP to further consolidate its gains in the center and center-right. Despite deep resentment toward him within the party, Agar is employing an old-school tactic to cling to the chairmanship: simply staying put. It will be difficult for his splintered opponents to pry him out of the seat, but the chairman's empty purse removes his strongest weapon. END COMMENT.

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